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LETTERS

TO THE

PHILOSOPHERS AND POLITICIANS

OF

FRANCE,

ON THE SUBJECT OF

RELIGION.

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TERENCE.

LONDON:

PRINTED FOR J. JOHNSON, ST. PAUL'S CHURCH YARD.

1793.

BRITISH MUSEUM

LETTERS

ADDRESSED TO THE

PHILOSOPHERS AND POLITICIANS

OF

FRANCE.

LETTER I.

GENTLEMEN,

THE repreſentatives of your nation, zealous to diſtinguiſh themſelves as the patrons of liberty, and the friends of the oppreſſed and perſecuted, in every part of the world, have done me the honour of making me a citizen of France; and many of your departments, conceiving much too highly of me, and miſtaking my talents, did me the farther honour of inviting me to take a ſeat in your Conventional Aſſembly. Though,

conſcious of my incapacity to diſcharge the duties of this appointment, and unwilling to abandon a ſituation of ſome uſefulneſs in this country, I declined *this* honour, I accepted with gratitude that of *citizenſhip* for myſelf, as well as for my ſon; and, willing to do every thing in my power for the country that has ſo generouſly adopted me, I ſhall run the riſk of being leſs favourably thought of by ſome of you, by addreſſing you on a ſubject which I conceive to be of infinite importance to all mankind, though it appears to be too much overlooked, or groſsly miſunderſtood, by the greateſt part of the French nation. You to whom I particularly addreſs theſe *Letters*, viz. the *Philoſophers and Politicians*, will ſmile, and ſome of you perhaps will proceed no farther, when I ſay that this ſubject is that of *religion*.

I am well aware that the very term *religion* will give many of you diſguſt. Nor do I wonder at it, when I conſider how much the thing has been abuſed, and how much the intereſted and artful have availed themſelves of

of the ignorance and credulity of the reſt of the world with reſpect to it, ſo that the groſſeſt impoſitions have long paſſed for ſerious truth.

Such, however, you well know to have been the caſe with reſpect to philoſophy, and eſpecially chemiſtry, though the age of myſtery and deception in this buſineſs is now over, and rational and uſeful ſcience has taken place of ſolemn pretenſions, abſurd ſyſtems, and idle tricks. But becauſe we now hear no more of the art of *tranſmuting metals*, or of the *elixir vitæ*, which were the great objects of the chemiſts of the laſt age, do we abandon every thing that bears the name of *chemiſtry?* Neither, then, ought we to diſcard every thing that bears the name of *religion*, becauſe we have exploded ſuperſtition and prieſtcraft.

The objects of religion are unqueſtionably of infinite magnitude, compared to which every thing relating to philoſophy and chemiſtry is as nothing. If there be a God, a

providence, and a future ſtate, which are the objects of religion, it muſt be of the greateſt conſequence to men to be apprized of them. For beſides that they are ſubjects of the greateſt ſublimity in themſelves, and moſt deſerving of our attention and contemplation as rational beings, our knowledge of them is of the greateſt uſe to direct our practice, and enable us to ſecure our greateſt happineſs.

I am far, however, from being willing to dazzle your minds with a diſplay of the magnitude, and intereſting nature, of the objects that I would recommend to your attention. Be as much upon your guard againſt deception as you poſſibly can. It behoves you to be ſo, and the more, in proportion to the importance of the ſubject. But be upon your guard alſo againſt deep-rooted prejudices with reſpect to a ſubject that you muſt acknowledge you have not much conſidered. Take nothing for granted, either from your nurſes, from bold atheiſtical writers, who abound among you, or from myſelf. But whatever means you apply to detect error, and inveſtigate truth,

in other caſes, apply them here; and admit nothing for true but when the reaſons in favour of it ſhall be ſuperior to thoſe againſt it.

I will even put the matter on this fair iſſue. I invite you to admit nothing but what ſhall appear to be leaſt contrary to *natural analogy*, and conſequently to *probability*. For I maintain that, as unbelievers in revealed religion, you admit what is more contrary to common experience, and daily obſervation, than I do. I well know you laugh at the idea of *miracles*; but I ſay that it will be found, upon inquiry, that you believe in greater miracles than myſelf. This you muſt acknowledge to be a fair iſſue, and upon this I freely put every queſtion between us.

I am, &c.

LETTER II.

Of the Being of a God.

GENTLEMEN,

WHEN I ſay that there is a *God*, I mean that there is an intelligent author of nature, and I maintain that it is moſt agreeable to natural analogy to admit this. Becauſe marks of *deſign*, which we univerſally conſider as indications of *mind*, are as conſpicuous in the works of *nature*, as in thoſe of *art*.

Would any perſon, after conſidering the ſtructure and obvious uſe of a *teleſcope*, maintain that it was made without any deſign, and not intended to give us a diſtinct view of remote objects, and therefore that it proves the exiſtence of a mind in which that deſign was formed, previous to the conſtruction of the inſtrument? Can the ſame perſon, then, conſider the ſtructure of the *eye*, and not ſay that

that it was a work of deſign alſo, its uſe being exactly ſimilar to that of the teleſcope, and at leaſt as well adapted to anſwer its end? Are not, alſo, hands, feet, and every other part of the human body, as clearly adapted to anſwer their ſeveral purpoſes? May not the ſame obſervation be made with reſpect to every part of nature? Is not every thing we ſee a part of one great whole? Does there not, then, exiſt a mind capable of comprehending this whole, and a cauſe that produced the whole? Is it not as abſurd to ſay that the viſible univerſe had no cauſe without itſelf, as that a teleſcope had none?

Whatever difficulty may attend the farther queſtion, *what was the cauſe of this cauſe*, thus far we proceed on the cleareſt grounds, following the moſt indubitable analogies; and difficult as it may be to conceive that this great cauſe of all things exiſts, and has exiſted, *uncauſed* from all eternity, it is not ſo difficult as to believe that any thing could begin to be without any cauſe; for this you cannot but acknowledge to be an abſolute im-

poſſibility. For if ever there was a time when nothing had exiſted, nothing could have exiſted. The actual exiſtence, therefore, of ſuch a world as this of which we make a part, a world which bears every poſſible mark of the moſt exquiſite deſign, is an irrefragable proof that there exiſts, and has exiſted from all eternity, a Being poſſeſſed of a mind capable of comprehending it, and that muſt be deemed the proper author of it.

That we do not *ſee* this great Being, is no evidence of his non-exiſtence. For as many things do not affect ſome of our ſenſes, which are the inlets of all our ideas, others may elude them all. Nor is it of any moment whatever in what kind of *ſubſtance* the attributes of power and intelligence, which we muſt aſcribe to the author of the viſible univerſe, reſide. In fact, we know nothing of any *ſubſtance*, having no idea of any thing but what we call *properties*, which, as we ſay, inhere in, or belong to, the ſeveral things, or ſubſtances, that we are acquainted with. It is enough for us that there are evident marks of deſign

deſign in what we ſee, to infer the exiſtence of *a deſigning cauſe*, whatever that cauſe be, and whether, with reſpect to its ſubſtance, it be viſible or inviſible, tangible or intangible, &c. &c. &c.

I am, &c.

LETTER III.

Of the Attributes and Providence of God.

GENTLEMEN,

ADMITTING the being of a *God*, or a *principle of intelligence* in the Univerſe, we muſt judge of the *deſigns* of this Being as we would of thoſe of any other, viz. by the character of his works. And the works of nature, I think you cannot but admit with me, are the works of a *benevolent* author; all percipient creatures being formed capable of enjoyments ſuited to their nature, and furniſhed with the means of procuring them, and alſo of avoiding, or mitigating, the evils to which they are neceſſarily expoſed.

The

The more we ſee into the œconomy of nature, the more ſenſible we are that all evil is ſubſervient to good, and, as far as we can judge, inſeparable from it; ſo that, for any thing that appears, the moſt benevolent Being would not have conſtituted the univerſe otherwiſe than it is. That we ſhould not be able to ſee the uſes of all particular evils, and ſhould not be able to comprehend the whole of ſo immenſe a ſyſtem as that of the univerſe, cannot appear ſurprifing, when one man is not always able, without particular inſtruction, to comprehend the works of another man.

It is alſo moſt agreeable to analogy to aſcribe the whole univerſe to *one author*, on account of the uniformity that is evident through the whole, and the ſubſerviency of one part to another, immenſe as this great whole is, and incomprehenſible as the great Author of it muſt be. If it would be unreaſonable to ſuppoſe that one being formed the head of a man, another the hands, and others the remaining parts of the body, equally unreaſonable would

it be to ſuppoſe that one being formed the earth, another the plants, another the fowls, and others the land and ſea animals belonging to it; ſince they are all intimately related to, and connected with, each other, and in fact are only parts of *one whole*. If we carry our views farther, we ſhall ſee the reaſonableneſs of concluding that the earth and the moon, the ſun and the planetary ſyſtem, nay the ſyſtems of ſuns, and every thing compriſed in the whole univerſe, had but one and the ſame author; ſince the ſame law of gravitation, and probably many other laws, connect them all.

Farther, as no intelligent being does any thing without ſome view, or deſign, we muſt conclude that every thing in nature has its ſpecific and proper uſes; that nothing was formed in vain; the moſt inconſiderable article, as it may appear to us, being as eſſential to the whole as the larger and more prominent parts. And as the laws of nature muſt be intimately known to the Author of them, he muſt foreſee every thing that can come to paſs, and muſt have planned every thing that comes

comes to paſs from the beginning, ſo that nothing can ever oppoſe his deſign. This is what we call the doctrine of an univerſal and particular *Providence*, or the adaptation of all things, and of all events, to the deſigns of that great Being who planned, and who preſides over, the whole. This is a truth no leſs clear and indubitable, than it is ſublime, and confounding to our underſtandings.

I frequently read the writings of your atheiſtical philoſophers, that I may clearly underſtand, and enter into, your views and feelings. I wiſh you would do the ſame with reſpect to our writings. In your endeavours to exclude the idea of a deſigning cauſe from the univerſe, I perceive much embarraſſment and contradiction, when you would ſubſtitute the term *Nature* for that of *God*. You are ſtruck with the manifeſt wonders of nature, and look no farther. I ſee the ſame wonders, but they lead me to revere the great Author of nature, that *mind* which comprehends the whole. You ſee nothing in nature but *effects*. I revere the *cauſe*. What you aſcribe

aſcribe to a blind undeſigning principle, ſomething that bears no analogy to what we call *mind*, or *perſon*, I aſcribe to a proper intelligent Being, a Being, whom I conſider, and am happy in conſidering, as ever preſent with me, and attentive to me, and to all things; who brought me into being for the moſt benevolent purpoſes, and who will conduct me through all the ſtages of it. You ſee nothing around you but ſomething to gaze at. I look beyond all this, to a Being, or a perſon, that I can ſpeak to, the object of my gratitude, my attachment, and my confidence.

Acknowledge then, that whatever elſe you may think of my ſentiments, they make me happier than yours can poſſibly make you; eſpecially when it is added, that, in my ideas, the preſent life is by no means the whole, nay, but the very infancy of my exiſtence, and that the great Being who made me, and who has placed me in a ſchool of diſcipline here, will not leave me in the grave, but produce me again, in circumſtances much more favourable than the preſent.

Here,

Here, I am ſenſible, you will ſmile again; but attend to what I ſhall obſerve on this ſubject in my next Letters.

I am, &c.

LETTER IV.

Of the Evidence of the Miracles performed in Atteſtation of the Jewiſh and Chriſtian Religion.

GENTLEMEN,

ADMITTING the being of a God, and his conſtant Providence, you aſk me what evidence I have of a *future ſtate.* I anſwer (and I beg you will not revolt at my language, but have the patience to hear me out) the expreſs declaration of God himſelf, that he will raiſe men from the dead at a future period, and that he will then render unto them according to their works; and you cannot doubt the power of the Author of nature to do this.

If you aſk me the evidence of this, which I know you will think a ſtrange aſſertion, I anſwer,

anſwer, that this has been declared by men who were commiſſioned by God for the purpoſe, and who proved their miſſion from him by ſuch works as God only, the Author of nature, could perform, viz. real *miracles*, an evidence of a power that could controul the laws of nature.

Again, the proof that ſuch miracles have been wrought is ſuch *teſtimony* as cannot be denied without admitting ſtill greater miracles, viz. that numbers of perſons, the beſt qualified to judge of them, and who had no motive to impoſe upon others, atteſt their reality. Since, to ſuppoſe that all thoſe perſons were either deceived themſelves, or concurred in a ſcheme to impoſe upon others, would be more evidently contrary to the known courſe of nature reſpecting mankind (who we muſt take for granted have been the ſame in all ages) than the reality of the miracles which they atteſt; this, when all the circumſtances of the caſe are attentively conſidered, being a more manifeſt violation of the eſtabliſhed laws of nature, than the other, and for no rational end.

For

For example, that the whole nation of the Jews, conſiſting at that time of ſix hundred thouſand men, beſides women and children, ſhould believe that, after ſeeing many miracles performed in Egypt, they all walked through the Red Sea, while the waters divided to make them way; that they all heard the diſtinct articulate pronunciation of the ten commandments from mount Sinai; that after continuing in the wilderneſs forty years, during which they were witneſſes of ſeveral other miracles, they all went through the river Jordan as they had through the Red Sea; that they ſhould obſerve the Paſſover, and other annual cuſtoms, in commemoration of thoſe events, and preſerve among them to this day books containing a diſtinct narrative of theſe events, univerſally, and at all times, believed to be written at the time while the events were recent, are facts of this nature.

Jews are *men*, and they were by no means previouſly diſpoſed to believe any thing of the kind above mentioned, or to practiſe the religious rites enjoined upon them in conſequence of

of them. And therefore that their minds ſhould be univerſally impreſſed with this belief, without a ſufficient cauſe, in the reality of the events, would be a proper miracle, nay a complication of miracles, of the moſt extraordinary nature. And what makes the caſe more extraordinary ſtill, it would be a ſeries of miracles wrought for no end; whereas the miracles recorded in the books of Moſes had a great and worthy object, viz. to impreſs the minds of the Jewiſh nation, and through them thoſe of other nations, with the firm belief of the ſupremacy of one true God, the maker of all things, and of his providence in conducting the affairs of men.

Alſo, the miracles performed by Chriſt, the great object of whoſe miſſion was the revelation of a future ſtate of rewards and puniſhments, are leſs extraordinary, and leſs contrary to the common courſe of nature, than the firm belief of ſo many thouſands of perſons, previouſly diſpoſed as they all were, that ſuch miracles were wrought; when they had every opportunity, and every

motive, that men could have to ſatisfy themſelves concerning their truth, on the ſuppoſition that no ſuch miracles were wrought. And the reality of their belief cannot be queſtioned, ſince they ſacrificed every thing that men hold dear to them in life, and many of them life itſelf, to their belief.

The miracle, for ſo I muſt call it, of ſo many perſons deceiving themſelves and others, could not have been calculated for any other purpoſe than that of *mere deluſion*, without any rational object whatever. Whereas the miracles on which the belief of Chriſtianity is eſtabliſhed had the greateſt and moſt glorious object that can be conceived, viz. the giving mankind a juſt idea of their future deſtination, ſhewing them that this life is but the infancy of their being, and that they are to be educated for an immortal life hereafter. The full perſuaſion of theſe great truths gives an unſpeakable dignity to the human character; it adds greatly to the true enjoyment of this life, and in a manner annihilates all its pains and troubles, as well as tends to prepare them for their future ſtate.

This

This was an object worthy of the author of the human race, and could not have been accompliſhed by any other than ſupernatural means; no appearances in nature giving us any rational ground to expect that we ſhall ſurvive the grave. Nothing, however, could be better calculated to produce this belief than ſuch miracles as Chriſt wrought, and himſelf, the great preacher of the doctrine, dying in order to exemplify in his own perſon, that reſurrection which he was authoriſed to promiſe to all. Had the moſt incredulous of mankind been aſked what evidence of a future life would ſatisfy them, they could not have demanded any thing more than this; nor, as I have diſtinctly ſhewn in my *Diſcourſe on the Reſurrection of Jeſus*, could they have demanded any ſtronger evidence of any fact, than that which divine Providence has actually provided for *this*; ſo that its credibility ſhould be ſtronger, eſpecially in remote ages, and to the end of time.

I am, &c.

LETTER IV.

Cautions againſt ſuperficial Reaſoning on this Subject.

GENTLEMEN,

IT is not my intention in theſe *Letters* to enter into a detail of the evidences of revealed religion. This I have done, in a great meaſure, in other publications; but only to give you what I apprehend many of you have not at preſent, viz. ſome idea of the importance of the ſubject, and the nature of the evidence, in order to induce you to make farther inquiries concerning it; and I wiſh you to do this with the diligence and rigour that the caſe requires.

Be perſuaded, then, to examine with due care and impartiality the evidence of the facts on which revealed religion is founded, as you would do with reſpect to any other intereſting facts of the ſame hiſtorical nature. It is acknow-

acknowledged that the facts recorded in the books of ſcripture are not analogous to any that now fall under our obſervation, and that, therefore, they require a proportionably ſtronger evidence. But then you will find the evidence to *be* proportionably ſtronger than that for ordinary facts; no other facts recorded in hiſtory being nearly ſo well atteſted. Circumſtanced as the primitive Chriſtians were, we cannot doubt but that both they, and their enemies, felt themſelves deeply intereſted in aſcertaining the truth with reſpect to them. In conſequence of this ſituation, we may be well aſſured that no other facts whatever underwent a thouſandth part of the ſcrutiny that, from the nature of the caſe, theſe *muſt* have done; and while they were *recent*, ſo that the examination was the moſt eaſy. Both the *perſecuted* and the *perſecutors* would do every thing that their oppoſite intereſts could ſuggeſt to prove, or to diſprove, the miracles appealed to. And we ſee that after a conteſt of three centuries, when Chriſtianity had all the powers of the world, and all the learning of it too, to con-

tend with, it prevailed, and eſtabliſhed itſelf. What could this be owing to but the power of truth? for it had no other advantage whatever.

Do not content yourſelves with ſaying that "mankind have always been the dupes of "impoſition, ſo that there is no occaſion to "trouble yourſelves with inquiring by what "means they were impoſed upon in this, or "any other particular caſe."

Credulity is an affection of the human mind that well deſerves to be conſidered by philoſophers. Like other *effects*, this muſt have a fixed *cauſe*. And the only reaſon why men become diſpoſed to believe without much inquiry, is an idea, acquired by themſelves, or received from others for whoſe opinion they have a reſpect, that ſtrict inquiry was not neceſſary; the thing to which their aſſent is demanded being ſo analogous to other undoubted events, that a ſlight evidence is ſufficient. This, however, ſuppoſes that the credibility of ſome events to which theſe are analogous

analogous was originally well eſtabliſhed. Conſequently, the too eaſy belief of extraordinary events affords a pretty ſtrong preſumption, that, though not the events in queſtion, yet that others ſimilar to them, were well authenticated.

If we ſee any perſon, by his knowledge of philoſophy, chemiſtry, ſleight of hand, or any other means, do things that aſtoniſh us, we give the cloſeſt attention to the facts, and do not admit them at firſt without very particular evidence. But having ſeen them, or been by any other means fully ſatisfied of their reality, we do not think it neceſſary to make the ſame ſtrict examination of ſimilar facts, reported to be performed by the ſame perſon, by thoſe in connexion with him, or by ſimilar means. They are then conſidered as common events, being agreeable to a new analogy of things.

The readineſs, therefore, with which the reports of miracles ſaid to be wrought by your ſaints in the dark ages, in which there is rea-

ſon to ſuſpect groſs miſtake, or impoſition, will afford a philoſopher an argument for believing that, in ſome preceding age, real miracles had been wrought, and that the credit of them had been well eſtabliſhed. For ſuch would be the neceſſary effect of the reality of the miracles of Chriſt and of the apoſtles. Theſe being admitted, the credulity of the Chriſtian world with reſpect to ſubſequent miracles followed of courſe, but not upon any other ſuppoſition.

In a ſimilar manner I account for your incredulity with reſpect to all miracles. You have given no attention to the evidence of the original and well authenticated miracles, but only to that of the ſubſequent and fabulous ones; and ſeeing reaſon to diſbelieve *theſe*, you have been led by a falſe analogy to ſuſpect *all*. But without conſidering the preſent ſtate of things, you ſhould place yourſelves in the ſituation of a philoſopher at the time of the promulgation of Chriſtianity, and examine the circumſtances of the original miracles, the credit of which procured the too eaſy

eaſy belief of the fabulous legends, at which you ſo juſtly revolt.

Many unbelievers, viewing things very ſuperficially, think to ſatisfy themſelves and others with ſaying, that *ancient traditions* are never to be depended upon; that there were Egyptian and Grecian fables, as well as Jewiſh and Chriſtian ones, but that now men of ſenſe pay no regard to any of them.

But they do not attend to the obvious and important diſtinction between *tradition* and *hiſtory*, between opinions taken up a long time after a ſuppoſed event, and written records of tranſactions coeval with them; and this is preciſely the difference between the fabulous hiſtories of Egypt and Greece, and the Moſaic and Chriſtian hiſtories. For it is as certain that the books of Moſes were written and publiſhed to the whole of the Hebrew nation in his life-time, and the hiſtory of the evangeliſts and the Acts of the Apoſtles in the age in which the tranſactions were recent, as that the hiſtories of Thucydides and

Tacitus

Tacitus were written and publiſhed in the ſame circumſtances; becauſe the people among whom they were publiſhed equally received them as genuine, and thereby gave their teſtimony to the general truth of their contents. And at no period of time would it have been more eaſy to procure them the reception they obtained in the one caſe, than in the other.

As human nature was the ſame at all times that it is at preſent, we may form a judgment of the difficulty of impoſing upon any nation, or people, ſuch hiſtories as thoſe of the ſcriptures by a ſuppoſition reſpecting ourſelves. Let any perſon then endeavour to perſuade the people of this country, that their anceſtors, in ſome remote period, paſſed from Calais to Dover, by walking through the ſea, which divided to make them way, and let him produce *books* containing a circumſtantial account of the event, as written at the time. Would he be able to procure any credit to the narrative? He would certainly be laughed at for his pains. In fact, it would be no leſs

difficult

difficult for him to do this, than to divide the ſea, as he had related. He would find the one to be as really impoſſible, as much contrary to the eſtabliſhed courſe of nature, as the other.

In like manner, let any perſon produce books ſimilar to thoſe of the New Teſtament, and ſee if he can gain ſuch general credit to them, as to induce thouſands of all deſcriptions of men to undergo the greateſt hardſhips, and even lay down their lives, for their faith in them, even in circumſtances far more favourable to his purpoſe than thoſe in which the evangeliſts wrote; he would find it as eaſy to raiſe the dead, as to effect any ſuch thing.

It requires only a due attention to *facts*, ſuch as no perſon who has any faith in hiſtory can deny, and to the well known principles of *human nature*, to perceive this. But few unbelievers in revelation have been diſpoſed to pay this due attention to either; and in conſequence of this they really believe things more extraordinary in their nature, and therefore

therefore more truly *incredible*, than the Jew or the Chriſtian.

Study, then, with particular attention the hiſtory of the times in which Chriſtianity was promulgated. The narrative is as circumſtantial, and as open to inquiry, as that of Cæſar and Pompey, or that of any other period of antiquity; and you will find indubitable facts, and innumerable of them, abſolutely inconſiſtent with your haſty and random hypotheſis.

You will find men of all deſcriptions, and of all nations, many of them as cool and ſenſible as yourſelves, and who had as much at ſtake, with reſpect to character, or fortune, as you can have; men who had every means of informing themſelves on the ſubject, and who evidently ſpared no pains in doing ſo; ſo impreſſed with the perſuaſion of the reality of the great events on which the truth of Chriſtianity is founded, that they perſiſted through life in giving the fulleſt evidence of their conviction.

And

And it is particularly to be obſerved, that this was not a perſuaſion concerning *metaphyſical opinions*, of which few perſons are competent judges, but things that were the objects of the ſenſes; ſuch as the inſtant cure of diſorders well known to be the moſt incurable, raiſing the dead to life, and other works equally miraculous and ſtupendous, in which there could be no ſuſpicion of fallacy, and of which all perſons are equally judges.

But ſome of your writers have given ſo little attention to this ſubject, though it is merely an hiſtorical one, that they have denied the very exiſtence of Jeſus Chriſt, have aſſerted that the very term *Chriſt* was borrowed from ſome Eaſtern language, having the ſame origin with *Chriſtnou*, one of the gods of Hindoſtan, and that Chriſtianity is only a particular modification of the worſhip of the ſun.

Serious as the ſubject is, it is not poſſible to forbear ſmiling at ſuch palpable ignorance. I ſhall expect that the ſame writers will ſoon attempt to allegorize the hiſtory of Julius

Cæſar, and maintain that no ſuch perſon ever exiſted. For there is not a hundredth part of the evidence for the exiſtence of Julius Cæſar, that there is for that of Jeſus Chriſt. Hereafter the hiſtory of France itſelf may be allegorized, the very names of *Lewis*, *Demourier*, and *Pethion*, may be derived from ancient languages, and the preſent war of your republic againſt the deſpots of Europe, may be ſaid to mean nothing more than the war of the elements of nature.

If I had not ſeen ſo much of the power of prejudice, I ſhould wonder that ſo many men, of unqueſtionable good ſenſe among you, and even able writers, ſhould have given ſo little attention as they have done to *natural probability*, in judging concerning an hiſtorical ſubject.

The letter of Pliny the younger is well known to all the learned, and its genuineneſs was never called in queſtion; and yet one would think that ſome of your writers againſt Chriſtianity had never heard of it. He wrote about

about A. D. 106, between ſeventy and eighty years after the death of Chriſt. In it he aſks advice of the emperor Trajan how to act with reſpect to the Chriſtians who were brought before him; and, ſpeaking of the progreſs that the new religion had made in his province, Bythinia, he ſays, "Many of "every rank, and of both ſexes, are accuſed, "and will be accuſed; nor has the contagion "of this ſuperſtition ſeized cities only, but "leſſer towns alſo, and the open country. "Nevertheleſs, it ſeems to me that it may "be reſtrained, and corrected. It is certain "that the temples, which were almoſt for-"ſaken, begin to be more frequented, and "the ſacred ſolemnities, after a long inter-"miſſion, are revived. Victims are every "where bought up, where for ſome time "there were few purchaſers."

Could Chriſtianity have made this amazing progreſs in ſo ſhort a time, without force, and againſt every poſſible mode of oppoſition, if there had been no ſuch perſon as Jeſus Chriſt, or if there had been no truth in the

the evangelical hiſtory. Bythinia was not very far from Judea, where it originated; and as both countries were within the ſame empire, there could not have been wanting any opportunity of making inquiry into the truth of the facts. And it is remarkable, that the nearer we approach Jeruſalem, as at Antioch in Syria, where the impoſture, if there had been any, muſt have been more evident, the more Chriſtians we find. That this ſhould have been the caſe without there being ſuch ſuch a perſon as Jeſus Chriſt, or any truth even in the miraculous part of his hiſtory, would be more extraordinary than any thing that is related by the evangeliſts; the admiſſion of which makes all the reſt perfectly eaſy and natural.

Mr. Lequinio, a later writer than Mr. Volney, does not deny the exiſtence of Jeſus Chriſt, but what he ſays of him is more improbable than even *this*. He repreſents him as the wiſeſt and beſt man that ever lived, which he certainly was; "one who was ac-
"tuated by the moſt ſincere good will to all
"the

" the human race, teaching the great princi-
" ples of moral equality, and the pureſt pa-
" triotiſm; braving all dangers, oppoſing the
" great, deſpiſing alike glory and fortune,
" equally temperate with reſpect to himſelf,
" beneficent to others, and ſympathizing
" with all; hated by the powerful, whom he
" provoked, perſecuted by the intriguing,
" whoſe artifices he expoſed, and put to
" death by a blind and deceived multitude,
" for whom he had always lived. This ge-
" nerous philanthropiſt," he ſays, " who
" wholly ſacrificed himſelf to the public
" good, who gave his whole exiſtence to the
" unhappy, and even to his perſecutors, never
" lied but to teach virtue."—*Prejugès detruits*, p. 286.

Was ever a character in romance more unlike any thing in nature than this? And yet this was an ordinary Jewiſh carpenter, who had no advantage of education or knowledge of the world. This man, Mr. Lequinio ſuppoſes, without any thing ſupernatural about him, to have acquired this moſt extra-

ordinary ſuper-human diſpoſition, a generoſity and magnanimity exceeding that of all the heroes and philoſophers of antiquity, to have converted thouſands of his countrymen to the belief not only of his being a prophet, or a man inſpired of God, but even *the Meſſiah*, whom before this they had univerſally expected would be a king and a conqueror, and that, after dying in the moſt public manner, he roſe from the dead, as he declared beforehand he ſhould do, in confirmation of his divine miſſion.

If a perſon of ſo excellent a moral character could be a mere impoſtor; if a man with ſo few natural advantages could deceive ſo many of his countrymen, all previouſly diſpoſed to reject his claim, and enable them to deceive ſo many more, of all nations, we muſt ſay that nature, neither before nor ſince that time, ever produced ſuch men, either to deceive or to be deceived. It is not however a little extraordinary, that Mr. Lequinio ſhould expreſs this high admiration of a man who directed his whole life, and finally died, to eſtabliſh

eſtabliſh that very *prejudice* which he himſelf is labouring to deſtroy. He certainly did not judge of the feelings of Jeſus Chriſt by his own.

Some of you may be diſpoſed to arraign the conduct of Providence in not ſuperſeding the uſe of miracles, by ſuch a general plan of things as ſhould render them unneceſſary for the moral inſtruction and improvement of man. But, beſides that it might be ſufficient in reply to this to ſay, that it is not our buſineſs to dictate to the Author of nature, we may eaſily perceive that if an attention, on the part of man, to the Author of nature be of any uſe to us, as it evidently is, this end is much better gained by occaſional deviations from the laws of nature than by a rigorous adherence to them.

Such is the conſtitution of human nature, (which we muſt take for granted is the beſt,) that things of conſtant occurrence, and perfectly regular in their appearance, do not eaſily excite particular attention. Who of

the bulk of mankind aſks the reaſon why the ſun riſes, why plants produce their proper ſeeds, or ſeeds their reſpective plants? But unuſual appearances excite univerſal attention, and we cannot be ſatisfied without knowing why they happen. It is very poſſible for a nation of men to paſs their whole lives in the view of all the wonders of nature, without ever inquiring after the Author of nature. But let their attention be excited by prodigies or miracles, and they will be led to reflect upon the ſubject, and thus come to revere God in all his works, thoſe of common providence, as well as thoſe of an extraordinary nature; and thus a reſpect for Him and his laws may poſſeſs their minds, and influence their conduct. And no perſon is authorized to ſay that this great end can be equally anſwered without miracles, or occaſional deviations from the regular laws of nature.

Let me adviſe you, in a more eſpecial manner, to read with the greateſt attention the hiſtorical books of ſcripture, and ſee whether they

they bear any marks of forgery. If your minds be truly unprejudiced, you will be ſatisfied that no books were ever written with ſo much ingenuouſneſs, or that have ſo many internal marks of truth. But do not expect that, with regard to compoſition, and accuracy in other things, they ſhould be without faults. Conſider the manners, opinions, and prejudices of the times in which they were written, and make due allowance for them. A tincture of theſe is an argument of their genuineneſs. For all that is pretended by well informed Chriſtians is, that the books that are uſually termed *ſacred*, were written by pious and honeſt men, well acquainted with the facts which they relate, but that they reaſon about them in ſuch a manner as it was natural that perſons in their circumſtances would do. Different writers alſo, like all other genuine original hiſtorians, relate facts with the ſame variations, with reſpect to order, and leſs important circumſtances, when they agree in every thing of real conſequence.

Conſider alſo that no writer is properly re-

ſponſible but for what he relates as of his own knowledge, or the events, and tranſactions, of his own times. The hiſtory of Moſes, for example, properly commences with the Exodus. The whole of the book of Geneſis muſt have been collected from tradition, and his account of the creation was ſuch as appeared to him, and other perſons of his age, to be well founded. He no where ſays that he was divinely inſpired in what he wrote on that ſubject.

That the books of ſcripture were written by particular divine inſpiration, is a thing to which the writers themſelves made no pretenſions. It is a notion deſtitute of all proof, and that has done great injury to the evidence of Chriſtianity; as alſo have other abſurd opinions, and various ſuperſtitious practices, adopted by Chriſtians of later ages, though from the influence of the circumſtances in which they were.

In my *Hiſtory of the Corruptions of Chriſtianity* you will find an account of all, or the principal,

principal, of thoſe opinions and practices, and of the cauſes which gave riſe to them. I beg your attentive peruſal of that work, as well as of my *Hiſtory of the Chriſtian Church to the Fall of the Weſtern Empire.* You will there, I flatter myſelf, ſee a natural account of the riſe and progreſs, as I hope you will alſo ſee the termination, of thoſe monſtrous corruptions of Chriſtianity which juſtly ſhock you ſo much, and which have indiſpoſed ſo many perſons of good ſenſe to all inquiry into the ſubject.

I mean particularly ſuch doctrines as thoſe of the trinity, tranſubſtantiation, vicarious ſuffering, and eternal torments; and, above all, the uſurpation of all power temporal and ſpiritual by the Popes, and other eccleſiaſtical perſons, with the horrid cruelties committed by ſome Chriſtians upon others on account of religion; and that moſt unnatural union of civil and eccleſiaſtical authority in all the civil eſtabliſhments of Chriſtianity in this country, as well as lately with you, from which circumſtance alone religion has been enabled to do ſo much miſchief in the world.

Theſe, and many other abſurd doctrines and practices, I diſclaim as much as you can do. They are far from being countenanced in the ſcriptures, though, from groſs miſtake, and from motives of intereſt and ambition, they have been repreſented as eſſential parts of it. You have been taught from your earlieſt years to conſider them in this light; and hence, when you come to reflect, your rejection of the whole ſyſtem, as manifeſtly abſurd, but without taking pains to examine whether the things at which you revolted were really parts of Chriſtianity, or not. You may alſo have been inſenſibly influenced in your rejection of Chriſtianity by a prejudice, natural to men of ſenſe, againſt whatever is commonly received by the vulgar.

A real philoſopher, however, will endeavour to diveſt his mind of *this*, as well as of every other *prejudice*, and to ſee things as they really *are*. And I flatter myſelf, that when your infidelity, which has been produced by the civil eſtabliſhment of a corrupted Chriſtianity, ſhall have contributed to the overthrow

overthrow of that ſyſtem, that which is genuine will meet with a candid hearing, and a cordial reception among you. True religion, not enjoined, or ſalaried, by the ſtate, but the choice of the individual, you will find a valuable ſupport of public virtue and public ſpirit; and a great ſecurity to your liberty. On this account, among others, I ſhall rejoice if, by any means, you can be induced to give to this important ſubject the attention which it deſerves, and I ſhall then have double pleaſure in ſubſcribing myſelf

Your fellow citizen,

J. PRIESTLEY.

LETTER V.

GENTLEMEN,

IN the preceding *Letters* I have addreſſed you as *philoſophers* and as *men*, intereſted in the diſcovery of important truth, and acquainted with the methods of inveſtigating it. If I were to addreſs you as *politicians* on the ſubject of *religion*, it would be in the language of the French merchants to your famous Colbert when he aſked them what the government could do in favour of trade, *laiſſez nous faire, let us alone*. It is a buſineſs with which, as ſtateſmen, you have nothing at all to do, and in which you can never interfere with any advantage either to *religion*, or to the *ſtate*.

Naturally, there can be no more connexion between *religion*, and *civil government*, than between *philoſophy*, *medicine*, or any other branch of knowledge and civil government; the

the objects of both being eſſentially different. The proper object of civil government is the ſecurity of men's perſons and property, which requires the union of force; but it has alſo no reſpect to any thing beyond the preſent life. Whereas religion conſiſts of peculiar doctrines and practices, which relate to men, perſonally and not collectively, conſidered, with reſpect to which no union of force can be of any advantage to them; and the great object of it is the happineſs of men, not as members of ſociety, but as individuals, and in a future ſtate, to which the power of civil governors does not extend.

With much more reaſon might the ſtate interfere in directing what *medicines* ſhould be adminiſtered to the members of the ſtate, and who ſhould adminiſter them; becauſe it might be ſaid, that the ſtrength of the ſtate depends upon the health and vigour of the citizens. But whatever be men's opinions concerning a future ſtate, and the means of preparing for it, or whether they have any belief in a future ſtate or not, care may be taken by good laws,

and

and a wiſe adminiſtration of them, to prevent their injuring one another in this life.

As far as religion comes in aid of good morals, it can only be by giving men an idea of its being their duty, from a regard to God, and a future ſtate, to behave well and to befriend their neighbours. But this depends upon the ſincerity of their belief in religion, which no power of the ſtate can enforce. Temporal puniſhments, or worldly emoluments, which are all that civil government can hold out to men, cannot make them *believers*. It can only make them *hypocrites*. And therefore there are more conſcientious men among ſectaries, who are not favoured, but frowned upon by the ſtate, than among the members of eſtabliſhments. Are not the Proteſtants among you at leaſt as good members of ſociety as the Catholics, many of them only nominally ſo; though the former, beſides bearing the whole expence of their own religion, contribute their ſhare to that of the ſtate? It is time that they be relieved, if not indemnified, for this extraordinary expence.

The

The ſame may be ſaid of the Diſſenters in England.

To ſuppoſe that Chriſtianity cannot ſupport itſelf without the aid of civil government, is the greateſt reflection upon it, and contradicted by the cleareſt facts in hiſtory. Not only did this religion eſtabliſh itſelf in the world without the aid of civil power, but during three centuries, while all the civil powers in the world were hoſtile to it. And after Chriſtianity had conſiderable countenance from the Roman emperors, the ſalaries of Chriſtian miniſters aroſe from the voluntary contributions of the laity, and there was no ſuch thing as *tythe*, or any thing in the form of a *tax*, for its ſupport, for more than a thouſand years after the Chriſtian æra.

Nay the wealth of the church, without the aid of the ſtate, grew exorbitant, and often required to be checked. This more than ſufficient proviſion for the clergy, from the ſuperſtition of ignorant ages, occaſioned ſuch a redundance in that order of men, that all

Chriſtian

Chriſtian countries ſoon groaned under the burden; and an independent ſubſiſtence, ſecured to them by private donations, and the laws of the ſtate, took from them all reſtraint upon their conduct; ſo that in many countries they became vicious and abandoned in the extreme, a great cauſe of the corruption, not of the reformation, of morals.

In this ſtate of things, religion being a mere trade, its doctrines, from cauſes that I have elſewhere explained, exceedingly abſurd, and the practices enjoined by it a miſerable ſuperſtition, men of good ſenſe and little inquiry, and eſpecially thoſe who were diſpoſed to be licentious, eaſily became unbelievers. This has been remarkably the caſe with you, and begins to be ſo with us. But as all evils, in the courſe of divine providence, tend to cure themſelves, this infidelity, which has been produced by civil eſtabliſhments of religion, will I hope be the means of overturning them; and then rational Chriſtianity, without any aid from the ſtate, will recommend itſelf to all thinking and ſerious men, and the world will be *rechriſtianized.*

I ſhall

I ſhall not trouble you, or myſelf, with the recital of all the evils that have ariſen from civil eſtabliſhments of Chriſtianity. Almoſt the whole of the long catalogue of complaints of philoſophers, and politicians, againſt religion have had no other ſource than this. All religious *perſecution*, and the hatred of one ſect to another, has been owing to excluſive privileges granted to ſome ſects. In North America, where there is no civil eſtabliſhment of any form of Chriſtianity, the members of all Chriſtian ſocieties, however diſcordant, live upon the beſt terms with one another, and the ſtate is at no expence on account of any of them.

With us the caſe is widely different, and the conſequences are ſufficiently apparent. We, who are Diſſenters from the eſtabliſhment, all lie under civil diſadvantages, and many of us are not even tolerated by law. In theſe circumſtances every attempt to obtain any relief from our burdens, nay all our endeavours, by means of the preſs, to enlighten the minds of our countrymen on the

ſubject

ſubject of religion, and eſpecially on the evil of eſtabliſhments, excites the greateſt hatred and animoſity againſt us. This is perfectly natural with men intereſted in the continuance of the abuſes by which they ſubſiſt.

What a glorious example would you ſet the Chriſtian world, if you could relieve civil government of all concern about religion, and leave men to provide for it as they ſhould think proper themſelves. No perſon who has a real value for his religion could complain of this. On the contrary, he would think his religion diſgraced by any ſupport from the ſtate. If the zeal of its friends will not provide for its ſupport, it ought to fall. The Proteſtants among you have not ſuffered their religion to fail for want of ſufficient funds; and do the Catholics think leſs highly of their religion, or have they leſs zeal for it than the Proteſtants have ſhewn for theirs? I believe not.

I do not mean, in theſe *Letters*, to do any thing more than to ſuggeſt a few hints to lead

lead your thoughts to the ſubject of *religion*, and its relation to the ſtate, ſo as to make it appear as worthy as I conceive it to be of your moſt ſerious attention. In ſeveral of my publications I have conſidered it much more at large. If you wiſh to know which of them I would more particularly recommend to your notice, I would take the liberty to mention my *Inſtitutes of Natural and Revealed Religion*, *Letters to a Philoſophical Unbeliever*, and the *Diſcourſe on the Reſurrection of Jeſus*, beſides the *Hiſtory of the Corruptions of Chriſtianity*, the *Hiſtory of the Chriſtian Church to the Fall of the Weſtern Empire*, and the *Hiſtory of early Opinions concerning Jeſus Chriſt*, noticed before. Theſe relate to the ſubject of religion in general, and the evidence of it. The ſubject of *civil eſtabliſhments of Chriſtianity*, I have conſidered in my *Eſſay on the firſt Principles of Civil Government*, in my *Letters to Mr. Burke*, and my *Familiar Letters to the Inhabitants of Birmingham.*

With my earneſt wiſhes for your proſperity, and eſpecially for the ſpeedy and happy

ſettlement of your civil conſtitution; truſting that it will be favourable to your beſt intereſts, by leading to *virtue* and *happineſs* (with reſpect to which I cannot help conſidering *religion* as of the moſt eminent uſe) and with ſincere gratitude for the honour you have conferred upon me; while in my native country, which I have faithfully endeavoured to ſerve, I have found neither protection nor redreſs, I am

Your fellow citizen,

Clapton, Jan. 21, 1793.
Of the French Republic 2.

J. PRIESTLEY.

7 DEC 1

THE END.